

## Polycentric World Social Forum: Caracas 2006

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February 5, 2006



As has happened every year for the last six years, at the end of January people from around the world gather in the World Social Forum (WSF) under the slogan “Another World is Possible.” The goal of the forum is to provide a space for social movements and civil society to reflect and strategize on ways to confront neoliberalism and militarism.

After meeting four of the last five years in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the forum moved this year to a new “polycentric” model of meetings in Mali, Venezuela, and Pakistan. The meetings originally were planned to be held simultaneously, but finally the Mali and Venezuela meetings were held sequentially with the Pakistan meeting postponed until March.

The Venezuela forum (also known as the second Americas Social Forum, after a similar hemispheric meeting in Quito, Ecuador two years previous) began on January 24 with a massive march through the streets of the capital city of Caracas. Over the next five days, delegates gathered in about 2000 workshops, panels, and sessions to discuss and debate a wide variety of issues.

About 80,000 people representing 2,500 organizations from around the world attended the forum. The largest delegation came from Brazil where the forum started, with the next largest group from the host country of Venezuela, and then the neighboring country of Colombia, and the United States providing the fourth largest with about 2,000 delegates. United States participation in the forum has been small but growing, and this was the first year that the U.S. had a significant presence.

The Caracas forum was much more monolingual than the previous forums. In Porto Alegre, the official languages were the four main colonial languages in the Americas (Portuguese, Spanish, English and French), and anyone who was merely bi-lingual was at a distinct disadvantage. In Caracas, the lingua franca was Spanish, with most people from Venezuela and neighboring Andean countries speaking only that language and expecting conversations to be in Spanish. Furthermore, a growing United States presence also introduced a sizeable mono-lingual English audience who increasingly felt alienated in the Spanish environment.

Reflecting these language politics, IPS’s forum newspaper *Terraviva* that previously had been published in several languages appeared exclusively in Spanish in Caracas. For the first time, the youth camp had its own newspaper called *El Querrequerre* (named after a local bird that dies if held in captivity) that published almost entirely bilingually in Spanish and English.

Setting the tone for the forum and reflecting its central issues, the leading slogan was “no to war, no to imperialism, another world is possible, another America is possible.” The dominant discourse at the forum, however, has radicalized. Rather than talking about war and



globalization, the language increasingly shifted to one of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism. Reflecting this, volunteers greeting delegates at the airport sported shirts with the slogan “a better world is possible, if it is socialist.” Another common slogan proclaimed “another world is necessary, and with you it is possible.”

Holding the forum in Venezuela was controversial, and reflects long debates within the forum over the relationship between civil society and party politics. On one hand, Hugo Chavez’s government is engaging in a process of social change in line with the goals of the WSF. As such, Caracas was a logical venue for a debate on how to construct a better world. On the other hand, from the beginning the WSF was designed to be an expression of civil society that explicitly rejected the participation of political parties or armed groups and statist solutions. These debates over the role of state structures in fostering social justice have long run through the political left.

For Venezuela, having the forum in their country was an excellent opportunity both to exchange experiences with others as well as to build international understanding and solidarity for the Bolivarian Revolution. Venezuela does not historically have a strong civil society, but under Chavez it appears to have grown significantly. A fourth of the 2000 panels in Caracas were organized by Venezuelan organizations.

Some people feared that in Venezuela the WSF would turn into a Chavez forum. In reality, Chavez was present everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Few Chavista banners or chants made their way into the opening march. Although several panels focused on building solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution, overall the discussions retained their broad ideological and thematic diversity with Chavez being a minor and relatively insignificant footnote.

The one exception, however, was Chavez’s personal presence at the forum. As in 2005 at Porto Alegre, Chavez headlined the largest event, although this time as leader of the host government WSF regulations permitted and sanctioned his presence. His speech reflected the consolidation and radicalization of the Bolivarian Revolution. Continuing his religious language, Chavez declared that “we are realizing the utopia dream that Christ did not see during his life.” He proclaimed that “this century we will bury United States imperialism.” Capitalism is destroying the planet, which leaves only two alternatives: socialism or death.

Chavez argued that the forum should take advantage of its momentum to build a political struggle, and that it is important to support governments like that of recently elected Evo Morales in Bolivia. He noted that the concrete advances in Venezuela would not have been possible without taking political power. Some participants resented Chavez injecting himself into one of the key debates in the forum. Chavez, however, argued that even if he were not president he would still be present advancing these ideas. “I am just one more person like the rest of you in forum,” he stated.

Lining the streets around meeting spaces vendors sold all sorts of Chavez memorabilia—hats, t-shirts, watches, and even dolls. Was his omnipresent image on the edges of the forum merely a reflection of opportunistic informal economic actors motivated by profit, or a manifestation of gung-ho supporters determined to use the forum to advance their political agenda? In either case, by their purchases many participants demonstrated their interest in, and support for, the Chavez agenda.



More significant, however, was the logistical and institutional support that the Chavez government provided to the forum. A week before the forum was to open, a bridge on the freeway between the airport and Caracas showed signs that it was on the verge of collapse and had to be closed. The government diverted traffic onto an old winding road through the mountains and poor neighborhoods separating the airport from Caracas, turning a safe and quick fifteen minute trip into a potentially dangerous trek of at least two hours and often much longer.

In response, the state oil company PdVSA provided free and safe shuttle service between the airport and the city. Once in the city, the government provided free transportation on the metro system, tents for the meetings, and even bottled water for participants. The government also waived visa requirements and airport taxes, facilitating the participation of as many people as possible. Chavez seemed to recognize this balancing act. “We have helped with forum and are willing to do so in future,” he stated, “but its work is completely autonomous.”

Although an expression of civil society, the forum could not succeed without external support. While the forum also received official support in Porto Alegre, due to the polarizing nature of the Chavez government this collaboration became even more overtly apparent and controversial in Caracas. Some argued that the forum should return to its original vision of providing non-governmental alternatives, while others maintained that governments are not inherently good nor evil but value neutral and that Chavez demonstrates how state structures can be used to advance goals of social justice. Who should be responsible for organizing and administering an enormous event continues to be a pressing issue.

Without governmental support, the forum would need to be scaled down significantly. And perhaps this would not be a bad idea. The forum has grown so large that it has become a logistical nightmare—with delegates often arriving late and missing speakers and discussions. Spread across a congested and polluted city, it was difficult to travel from one event to another. With an additional 80,000 people dumped on the metro system, all hours seemed to be peak hours with riders often having to wait for several trains before finally squeezing onto one. The organization of the forum was often loose and chaotic, with events starting late or being canceled. As with the bridge into the city, the forum seemed to be on the verge of collapse under its own weight. Larger is not necessarily better, and cannot be used as a measure of success.

Others, however, found encouragement in the chaos as people joined together in good spirits to overcome adversities. It reflects a certain amount of flexibility, both on the part of the



government and the forum, to adapt to changing circumstances. It is this creativity that brings a good deal of strength and power to the WSF.

After having a good five-year run that significantly advanced the agendas of social movements around the world, perhaps the WSF has served its purpose. During its tenure, South America has taken a significant swing to the left. While the conditionality programs of international financial institutions helped lead to the birth of the WSF, recent announcements that Brazil and Argentina will pay off their International Monetary Fund (IMF) burdens signals a need to rethink and reorient social movement strategies. Civil society has become empowered and revitalized with new ideas. Even in the United States, the fundamentally subversive notion of organizing a social forum has taken hold and led activists to rethink fundamentally how to organize civil society. As Chavez noted, the goals of social justice expressed at the WSF are well on their way to being the dominant discourse in the world, and those who advocate putting capital before people will soon be seen as the dissidents.

What role will the forum play in that process? The WSF tends to remain to a certain degree a place where organizations quickly organize events but then fail to realize its potential to network and connect with other movements and struggles until the next forum the following January. Participating organizations and movements must engage in an evaluation of how they can realize meaningful articulations of these struggles throughout the year. At this point, the most important and interesting initiatives are emerging not at the annual global meetings of the WSF, but in the local, regional, and national actions inspired by these meetings.

Perhaps at this point the World Social Forum has served its original purpose of altering the discourse around economic and social policies. It has been a wonderful place to break out of the isolation of solitary local organizing efforts, connect with others around the world working on similar issues, and regain energy to continue the struggle. It has realized the goals of the slogan “globalize the struggle, globalize hope.” No matter what shape it takes in the future, the WSF has been a historic experience with a lasting impact on social movements around the world.

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